

Jumpstarting a Career in Public Service

[The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy](#) turns professionals into policy advocates. We offer innovative training programs to equip leaders across sectors – from tech to climate, science to social impact – with the practical policy skills to craft solutions for society's most pressing challenges. Based in the Bay Area, the Policy Academy is the first comprehensive nonpartisan and non-university training program in the United States offering a step-by-step process to learn practical strategies for policymaking. The Academy's predecessor, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub, has helped more than 500 alumni and staff gain government experience and seek policy impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After participating in the Tech Executive Leadership Initiative (TELI) program in 2020, Marcela Alava shifted her career to public service and became a leading official at the White House. After a career leading information technology initiatives both in the private sector and for nonprofit organizations, Marcela wanted a role that would allow her to have a greater impact. Through TELI, a program launched by the Aspen Tech Policy Hub alongside the Tech Talent Project and Project Redesign, Marcela discovered how government technology leadership positions could make a difference. During the program, Marcela also connected with federal technology leaders, which eventually led her to roles at the White House supporting technology solutions. She is now the Chief Information Officer at the Social Security Administration, overseeing technology strategy, implementation, management, staffing, and solutions for the entire 60,000-person agency.

BACKGROUND

Marcela is an information technology, transformation, and strategy leader. Prior to her time in the TELI program, she held several leadership roles in technology, including serving as the Chief Digital Officer at the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, where she led a full digital transformation and Ad Council campaign to improve the organization's outreach, and as a division Chief Information Officer at Sony Pictures –

Home Entertainment, where she led global digital transformation and other major technology initiatives.

In 2020, Marcela was keen to find new opportunities that would leverage her skills in IT and technology strategy to have an even greater impact. She learned about the TELI program via an information session and decided to join after seeing the program syllabus and hearing stories from other private sector technology leaders who pivoted into government service.

“I was with some of the smartest people — amazing people who had invented things, sold things, who were CEOs of their own companies. They have been so helpful in navigating the government technology ecosystem.”

Marcela Alava

IMPACT

Inspired by some of the public service leaders she observed speaking during the TELI program, Marcela joined the White House in 2021, working for one of the speakers she met during the program, David Recorden. There, she used learnings from the TELI program, including lessons on federal procurement and budgeting, to deliver technology strategy and enterprise applications for the Executive Office of the President and became Deputy of White House Information Technology. She’s now Chief Information Officer at the Social Security Administration (SSA), leading a team of 3,100 employees and about 3,000 contractors to improve technology delivery for the 65+ million Americans who receive Social Security. Her role at SSA includes developing and executing a digital modernization strategy for the agency.

Marcela says the TELI program opened her up to a myriad of opportunities in the federal technology ecosystem that she previously did not know existed. “Being able to have this magnitude of impact — I never thought I could do this,” she said. “The level of impact you can have by joining federal service — there is just no equivalent anywhere else. And I hadn’t realized that until TELI.”

Marcela also credits the TELI program for building a network of partners that has been invaluable to her current work. She regularly works with other TELI members who have entered into federal service and is even bringing in a fellow member of her cohort to join SSA on a part-time basis.